An overview of the journey — what we have learned and how we are reshaping extension and engagement activity to better serve Missouri.

As a signature initiative for University of Missouri Extension throughout 2017, Building Our Future Together implemented a statewide needs assessment for Missourians and an examination of MU Extension’s operation and impact — on and off campus. This assessment and examination has paved the way for reimagining how extension and engagement activity is carried out at the University of Missouri.

A significant outgrowth of the Building Our Future Together initiative is a renewed commitment to the people of the state. This commitment is best characterized as All Things Missouri.

All Things Missouri expresses how the university will pursue engagement and extension activity going forward. All Things Missouri is not a symbolic statement. Rather, it’s about deepening the relationship with the university’s prime constituent group and largest funding source — the people of Missouri.

All Things Missouri is a way of doing business to advance the state and its people.

This focus on All Things Missouri doesn’t signal an inward-looking organization that is no longer concerned with the broader world. The reality is that the challenges facing Missouri are common elsewhere. Solutions developed for Missourians can be applied in most of the United States and much of the world.

Moderated community conversations, such as the one in Warrensburg, above, were held across Missouri to get a clear understanding of the needs of Missourians.
Learning about Missouri

At the base of *All Things Missouri* is a clear understanding of the state and its people. To clarify and gain a deeper understanding of Missouri, MU Extension conducted a series of 42 moderated community conversations across the state. The series provided input from a cross section of 1,200 people — urban and rural. Some knew extension, some did not. Some issues brought to light were obvious and some were surprising.

As community conversations took place and perceptions about issues came forward, a separate effort was underway to partner with the MU Center for Applied Research and Engagement Systems (CARES) to modify an online quantitative data assessment tool that could drill into local community-specific data.

With a large location-specific data set to pull from, the tool sheds light on the perceptions that flowed from community conversations, giving decision-makers the ability to understand the depth of an issue and providing clues as to how the issue might be addressed.

The university has a long history of collecting valuable Missouri-specific data that people, business, industry and government can use during analysis or decision-making. Making this information available has been a challenge. Now, as part of the commitment to *All Things Missouri*, an online delivery system for this reservoir of Missouri-specific information is being made available. Making this data available to the public is a prime example of how the University of Missouri is the university for Missouri.

Learning about extension and engagement at MU

As a reimagining process to guide future extension and engagement activity at MU, *Building Our Future Together* not only considered the needs of Missourians, but also the state of extension and whether its activities have impact of value.

An independent examination of MU Extension was conducted by TEConomy Partners and a six-member thought-leader panel comprised of engagement and extension leaders from public and private universities.

The report from TEConomy Partners is a statement on the reach, impact and value of extension’s broad array of programs. It highlights a ten-fold return in value that MU’s extension activities yield for Missourians — an $86 million investment in extension leverages $950 million in economic impact for the state.

Based on data, the report validates that MU Extension is upholding the extension leg of the university’s land-grant mission.
The report makes it clear that extension helps ensure that important research discoveries, innovations and technologies are brought to the attention of those needing to implement them.

In recognition of the millions of people touched by MU Extension programming, the report notes that MU Extension has generated a substantial track record in contributing to the economic and social well-being of Missourians and the state.

While the report from TEConomy Partners had a heavy emphasis on data-supported information, the report from the Thought Leaders Panel was qualitative in nature. Based on interviews with faculty and staff, the report reflects lingering attitudes from controversial campus events that took place in the fall of 2015.

The report covers a range of issues including the decentralized organizational structure, communications, human relations, identity separation between the MU campus and extension and the need for aligning research and engagement.

Within the document, there is a recommendation for identifying engagement as an MU mission area, embracing place-based community and economic development and aligning the values of the institution with those of the public.

The report notes opportunities that MU and MU Extension, in particular, can embrace in the near term.

Engaging the entire university
Following the arrival of Vice Chancellor Marshall Stewart in fall 2016, there has been considerable talk about engagement. Moving into 2017, the connection between traditional extension and engagement activity throughout Mizzou was strengthened by the formation of the MU Engagement Council. While extension offices across the state provide a physical presence for engagement and extending university knowledge into communities, the entire university is called to engage and extend. It does so at a level that might surprise the most ardent MU supporter.

“The Brick,” a fond staff name for an early spreadsheet printout, represented an initial attempt to capture university engagement. At more than three inches thick, The Brick described hundreds of university engagement activities across the state. Now captured in a searchable cloud-based data set, these faculty- and student-driven activities further connect the university to rural and urban communities in all 114 counties of the state.

Collectively, the efforts contained in the Building Our Future Together initiative are helping to chart a new course for extension and engagement activity at the University of Missouri overall. As we concern ourselves with All Things Missouri, the organizational structures and delivery systems are changing to meet the challenges of Missouri. The result will be an adaptable organization that reflects a changing Missouri with a bright future.

Reimagining the Future
Individuals familiar with extension and engagement at the University of Missouri could see that with the arrival of Vice Chancellor Stewart, the time was right to reimagine the future for extension and engagement.

A multi-decade downward funding trend called into question staying the course. There was an understanding that if the organization was not seen as relevant and capable of fulfilling a mission that the public values, the organization and the public it serves would be at greater risk.

Under the banner of Building Our Future Together, the three fact-finding efforts previously mentioned provided clarity for the reimagining work.

By challenging assumptions about the needs of Missourians and MU Extension’s ability to provide impacts that address these needs, MU Extension leadership was in a better position to chart the course for its future — a commitment best characterized as All Things Missouri.

All Things Missouri — our way forward
All Things Missouri is a way of doing business to advance the state and its people. It’s about deepening the university’s relationship with the people of Missouri. With a focus on All Things Missouri, we are building on identified strengths and opportunities. We are addressing identified challenges.

In the interest of being responsive to critical challenges and addressing the need for identified changes, the process of change began even before the end of the assessment.
An honest look at how MU Extension activities could be restructured to best meet the needs of the people is underway. The business model and roles and responsibilities that were set into motion 50 years ago are being challenged. The goal is to create stronger engagement and outcomes at the local level without being hampered by internal or geographic structures.

Without question, changing long-standing business models and assumptions is challenging the organization, but it is a good challenge.

Beyond organizational structure, there is a push to make certain that funding, programing, delivery methods, collaboration and engagement from the entire spectrum of the university are considered.

Charting a new course will present unique challenges. To maintain relationships and avoid disruption, an iterative process of refinement will be used. The end result will be a more agile and nimble MU Extension.

Maintaining a focus on what is best for the people of Missouri will be our North Star as we continue our work.

As this effort continues to unfold, you can keep up to date by visiting the MU Extension website:
http://extension.missouri.edu/staff/buildingfuture.aspx